

**HEROES AND HERETICS:**  
**An 8-Week Course on Early Church History**

**WEEK 5**            **February 14, 2016**  
**Teacher:**        **Pastor Pickens**

**Eusebius – The Father of Church History**

**Life:**

Eusebius was born in the early 260's probably in Caesarea. Origen had started a school in Caesarea during his time away from Alexandria and taught there for about 20 years. After Origen left the school was taken over by Pamphilus, who never met Origen but did admire him. Eusebius was Pamphilus' pupil and greatly admired him. As time went on Eusebius began to work alongside of his mentor.

Christianity was widely persecuted in the Roman Empire around 250 AD. It was viewed as a threat and Emperors Decius and Valerian opposed it. Eusebius is born, taught, and begins his life in the church a decade after this. It enables Eusebius to grow up as a church scholar, learning theology and compiling various works.

Around the beginning of the 4<sup>th</sup> century the Great Persecution began (303-313 AD, spasmodically). The Roman Empire began to notice the spread of Christianity and they viewed them as disloyal to the Empire because they refused to offer sacrifices to the Emperor as a god. Under Emperor Diocletian the Great Persecution began which universalized throughout the Roman Empire Christian persecution. The Roman Empire had seen widespread persecution of Christianity around 250 AD. However, this persecution was even more totalitarian. In particular, it was a death sentence for anyone who refused to offer sacrifices to the Emperor. This sacrifice was viewed as supreme loyalty to the Roman Empire and it was a practice that believers understood they could not accept or take up. During this persecution many bishops are martyred. Pamphilus was also arrested and martyred. Eusebius remembers and draws attention to Pamphilus and other martyrs. He records their accounts for others to read. As you read these accounts Foxes' Book of Martyrs, which is a record of martyrs during the Reformation, is very similar in feel and sentiment.

As time goes on Eusebius is ordained as a presbyter and later, after the Great Persecution, he is appointed as Bishop of Caesarea (about 313 AD). It's during this time period that one of the great controversies of the early church arises. Most of the early church heresies are oriented about the person of Jesus Christ. There are two prominent presbyters who come into the picture. One is name Arius (250-336) and the other is name Athanasius (297-373). A sharp dispute about the identity of Jesus Christ breaks out between the two men. The dispute is great enough that it starts to be felt throughout the Christian community.

At this point Constantine is the Roman Emperor. He wants to bring unity throughout his Empire so he calls together a church council. The council convenes in Nicaea in 325 AD. The central decision of the council revolved around Christology. The council met from May to July of 325 AD. At that time Arianism and the present orthodox view of Christ (Ossius and Athanasius) were both minority positions. Eusebius of Nicomedia was a strong supporter of Arius, who supported his view from Scripture (Col. 1:15; John 3:16). Eusebius of Caesarea attended with the majority with a middle-of-the-road position. Eusebius puts forth a creed that is used in Caesarea as a proposed creed to be affirmed. After some revision the creed was accepted. The exact number of bishops in attendance at the Nicene Council is uncertain. Anywhere from 220-318 bishops were present and somewhere from 218-316 voted in favor of the Nicene Creed. Only two bishops, who were friends of Arius, voted no. In particular, the revision was oriented about the term homoousios (same substance). "The next thing less than infinite is infinitely less."<sup>1</sup>

This is as best we can tell the original form of the Nicene Creed: "We believe in one God, the Father, Almighty, maker of all things visible and invisible; And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the Son of God, begotten of the Father, only-begotten, that is, of the substance of the Father; God of God, Light of Light, very God of very God, begotten not made, of one substance with the Father, through whom all things were made, both in heaven and on earth; who for us men and for our salvation came down and was incarnate, was made man, suffered, and rose again on the third day, ascended into heaven, and is coming to judge the living and the dead; And in the Holy

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<sup>1</sup> J. Gresham Machen, *What Is Faith?*, 116.

Spirit. And those who say: "There was a time when he was not", and: "Before he was begotten he was not", and: "He came into being from nothing", or those who pretend that the Son of God is "of another substance or essence" or "created" or "alterable" or "Mutable", the catholic and apostolic church places under a curse."

The controversy continues to go on until 381 where the Council of Constantinople finally condemns it. Eusebius does not involve himself significantly in the controversy throughout the rest of his life. However, at the Council of Niceae, Eusebius met Constantine. Over the years Eusebius would grow in favor and admiration of the Emperor. Upon Constantine's death Eusebius even writes a work to commemorate the Emperor in glowing language. In 338/339 AD Eusebius passes away in Caesarea. The end of his life seemed to be peaceful and allowed him time to compose and compile more literary works.

**Thought:**

Eusebius was not a very original thinker. For the most part his works are historical, derivative, or compilations of other thinkers. His *History of the Church*, which is probably his greatest literary contribution to future generations, is significantly made up of quotations and portions of earlier writings. Eusebius is a scholar and amasses a significant library in Caesarea. However, even his apologetical works are primarily defenses and summaries of early works.

It's valuable for us to recognize that the Church needs both. This isn't to say that the Church needs original thinkers who go beyond the Bible. However, the Church needs original thinkers who engage on a deep level with the Scriptures. There is a need for thinkers who also are gifted to speak into the atmosphere and mindset of people in their congregations, cultures, and times. Historians are able to contribute to this by identifying past similarities. These scholars often offer a foundation for more original thinkers to bridge into unique circumstances.

History of Christianity – The continuation of the Church. Christ may not return immediately. In this there is also a necessary emphasis given to the Word of God. If Christ is not going to immediately return then we need a rule of faith and life. The Word of God is that rule. Christ continues to be the head of his church. He rules her by his Word. Officers are ordained to be ministers of the Word and to teach the way of God in accordance with the truth. The big questions which must be answered are: What is the Word of God? What does the Word of God teach?

Eusebius makes a significant contribution to the organic formation of the New Testament canon. First he goes over a list of books that are universally accepted as authoritative in the Church. These books are recognized by all as God's Word. This list includes 22 of the 27 books in the NT (excluding 2 Peter, 2 and 3 John, James, and Jude). The five that are not universally accepted by all are then listed as being 'familiar to most.' They are widely recognized as God's Word. Majority of the Church accepts them as God's Word.

What is of further benefit is that Eusebius then goes into books that are disputed, or not accepted as being on the same authoritative level as God's Word. These books have valuable information; however, even then they were recognized as different in content and authority than the New Testament. The final category that he mentions is spurious books that should be thrown out and disregarded. This list will be helpful for the authoritative recognition by the Church of the books in the New Testament that will come shortly after Eusebius' life.

A lot of his thought is taken from Origen. This makes sense given where he was raised and taught. However, as he affirms the Nicene Creed you see that there is also growth that takes place in this man.

Eusebius has strange views on the role of the Roman Emperor. This makes sense given the strong opposition to Christianity prior to Constantine. There is a lot of hope placed in the Emperor at this point, a hope that is too great given his position. He views him in a way as God's servant that goes beyond Romans 13. He starts to thread Christianity and Constantine together. He accepts Constantine's right to make decisions that impact the Church and her theology.

"[T]he first function of a confession of Faith is to make sure that Scripture is our primary standard in all matters of faith and conduct...A second function of a Confession of Faith is to provide a rallying point for those of like mind concerning the main teachings of Scripture...A third function of a Confession of Faith is to serve as a public statement of the faith of the people of God, and to instruct in the faith...A fourth function of a Confession of Faith is to be a solemn bond for the office-bearers of the Church."<sup>2</sup>

**Take Away:**

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<sup>2</sup>Roland S. Ward, *The Westminster Confession of Faith, A Study Guide*, 14-15

Church history gives us good theology and heresies to avoid. We don't put this on the level of Scripture. It can always be disputed and Creeds can be amended. However, it should be a careful and serious matter when they are. We have here a guide for orthodox thinking. It trains us how to interpret God's Word and difficult theology.

Martyrdom – we can find great encouragement from those who hold fast to Christ. I find it a great encouragement to read about Christians who have suffered and yet been supported and provided by God through Christ who strengthens them (Phil. 4:10-13). In particular, *Foxes Book of Martyrs* and John Piper's *Filling Up the Afflictions of Christ* are good reads.

We are those who are being refined and even our thinking will be refined throughout our lives (Phil. 3:12-16; 2 Tim. 3:14-17; Tit. 2:1, 3, 7-8, 12, 15). Thought gives guidance to living and feeling. Church history again and again gives us a pattern that the best thinkers make the best doers.

**Resources:**

Eusebius, *The History of the Church* (also the introduction to Eusebius's life in the Penguin Classics Edition)

Tim Dowley, *Introduction to the History of Christianity*

Stephen J. Nichols, *For Us and For Our Salvation: The Doctrine of Christ in the Early Church*